


Civil justice system is last line of defense for consumers

Over the years, the American civil justice system has become a popular punching bag for corporate pawns in Washington who like to blow hard about juries distributing "jackpot justice." But recent events serve to remind us that the marketplace is the real casino, and the courtroom is the one place that finally protects consumers when they roll the dice in the showroom.



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America's civil justice system is our best and last line of defense against substandard medical care, unsafe consumer products and unscrupulous business practices. If corporate lobbyists are able to shut down consumer lawsuits while so many consumer protection agencies are asleep at the switch, as

they have been for years, then we will surely see many more consumer-commerce crack-ups like the Toyota Motor Company debacle that's all over the news right now.

As it turns out, Toyota has been manufacturing vehicles with serious defects for several years, including, most infamously, the deadly acceleration defect that has killed a number of people. All the while, the company has managed to drastically limit its recalls in this country, leaving millions of vehicles on the road with potentially lethal defects. Adding insult to injuries, Toyota lobbyists brazenly boasted to the company's top brass about profits it saved by minimizing recalls.

This is probably just the tip of the iceberg. Through recent congressional hearings we've discovered that Toyota may have knowingly misled American consumers as to the cause of its product malfunctions. Furthermore, the company allegedly forced out one of its own defense attorneys after he protested its instruction to withhold evidence in vehicle rollover cases against which the company was defending.

While the company has been focusing relentlessly on avoiding accountability, thousands of consumers have been exposed to horrific danger, and some of it turned out to be deadly. Federal records show 2,600 complaints of sudden acceleration from Toyota and Lexus owners, according to the Los Angeles Times. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration revealed that in the U.S. at least 56 people have died in car accidents involving Toyotas where a sudden unintended acceleration was alleged.

You might be asking yourself, "Isn't somebody supposed to be watching over these companies, assuring their products are safe?" The answer is yes. Several government agencies are charged with assuring the safety of goods that enter the U.S. market. Among them are the Consumer Product Safety Administration and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. But these agencies are grossly understaffed and underfunded and cannot keep up with their workloads, especially now that the stream of commerce flows into the U.S. from international points of origin, where health and safety standards are sometimes lax or virtually nonexistent.

At no point in our history have such a high percentage of our goods come from foreign countries. In fact, last year 83 percent of recalls announced by the Consumer Product Safety Administration were from foreign manufacturers. And as lethal products inevitably make their way into the U.S., consumers look to their historic fallback — the American civil justice system. When consumer